

By Anders Ruby

What is Called Listening?

Initially, one could make the simple distinction between activity and passivity when it comes to listening. Passive listening is simply listening “turned on”, a kind of functioning auditive apparatus. A perceptive awareness of sound as part of an unremarkable background. An animal radar. Opposed to this, active listening denotes a state in which sound as a medium becomes apparent on its own. Sound goes from unnoticeable carrier of meaning to sound object. In this way, counterintuitively, listening to someone speak would amount to nothing more than a passive listening in regard to sound itself. Active listening would contrarily stand in the way of meaning, since the sound object then becomes a signifier and not a medium.ⁱ In other words, the “active listening” that we know from management strategies (listening

i A somewhat similar distinction between hearing as respectively physiological and sense-making is made by Nancy in his *Listening*, with the important distinction that I don't think the concepts of active and passive as I use them here simply map on to respectively physics and sense. The dialectical point in our case, highly Lacanian I think, is rather that none of the categories hold their own as soon as they are presented to each other, and that this presentation is necessary for their constitution.

attentively to the meaning or message of the statements as opposed to an automatic listening) stand in stark contrast to the concept of activity we need here, which would be closer to the approach of *musique concrète* (listening to the sound object as something radically separated from its source). The point of the distinction, then, becomes whether you include the activity of listening as itself part of the experience.

Yet, I think that any productive notion of analytical listening will conform to neither category but fall somewhere in between. Listening to the patient solely as music is likely to miss the point, whereas the overhearing of the mediation – thinking as it unfolds in the medium of sound – will miss the point on behalf of being deafened by sense-making. One must neither be seduced by the aesthetics or the meaning, if one wishes to hear some truth.ⁱⁱ In this sense, analytical listening seems to aim for a kind of active passivity. Listening in this manner is of course on the one hand different from an automatic one. We could say, “The unexamined listening is not worth hearing” to make a sonic paraphrase of Plato’s slogan,ⁱⁱⁱ but on the other hand, it also differs radically from a free choice and is thus not something we can simply learn to do as part of a technical attitude. Rather, one is called into listening, precisely the same way, I would claim, that one is called into thinking, according to Heidegger. But I think we can develop this without the implications of the Heideggerian stance. We must adopt a certain posture of listening, meaning a way to be positioned in relation to this listening itself, and this posture is adopted only through an inclusion of otherness that is found outside the dichotomy of activity and passivity. The activity of a being who is listening is that of experiencing oneself passively positioned as listening, and this split, this convergence of passivity and activity is, I believe, what the analytical listening consists of.^{iv} Not simply hearing what you think as constitutive of consciousness, but hearing what you hear, which is

ii This is also, I think, how Dolan theorises the voice in *A Voice and Nothing More*, and yet the route I am trying to take here focuses less on the object (voice) and more on the subject (listening), to put it in blunt terms.

iii The famous dictum goes: «examining myself and others is the greatest good to man, and (...) the unexamined life is not worth living» Plato, apology 38a, 1914.

iv This idea clearly hinges on the Lacanian developments of «seeing oneself being seen» as it is for instance laid out in Seminar XI. (Lacan 1964). The theoretical counterpoint to this, that I am none the less trying to balance, is of course Heidegger’s as seen in respectively *Sein und Zeit* and even more so in *Was heißt Denken?*

to say, how you are called into hearing, which would be constitutive of the kind of listening that pertains to the subject. Another way to formulate my interest here would be to ask how you emerge not as a speaking but as a listening subject, and if perhaps something in listening gets at subjectivity in a manner that speaking never could.

WHAT SUBJECT CAN BE HEARD, LISTENING?

The development that I will venture into is to try and think a subject not just as a form of being, not just as something that can listen, but as something that is not, if it is not being listening, which obviously brings us in Heideggerian territory simply by adding the hyphen, theorising that a subject amounts to a being-listening. It sounds like that could get a little *dunkel*, but I hope to keep it sufficiently lit, since I am not sure how far one can push those Heideggerian developments before language itself becomes so active that it starts to solve what you are trying to think. That is to say, I think the Heideggerian language of ambiguity might sometimes solve its otherwise profound questions by poetically implying that the ambiguity itself is not a property of language but rather of the way language covers a more substantial layer of being. But this would obviously also be a pressure point between Heidegger and Lacan.

The active passivity that could count for both being and listening in equal measures, is essential to understanding the emergence of the subject in listening. The subject, as a being-listening, discovers itself not through an intentional act of volition but rather through a kind of passive reception that paradoxically requires an active openness. These are our overlapping circles. It is a way of looking for a subject that does not create meaning but is instead caught within it, implicated simply by the act of listening. This encounter, finding oneself here, is not about discovering a fully formed, stable self, but rather about sensing the condition of subjectivity as an ongoing tension – being present as a listener while simultaneously recognising the impossibility of living up to this role of recipient into which one has been cast. The meaning goes amiss, and yet, what was amiss in the speaker's activity to begin with might precisely be heard by the being-listening. So what emerges in this tension is the realisation of the subject as something other than speaking, something other than acting, always already positioned in relation to an otherness that precedes and exceeds it.

Listening differs from other senses in a profound way. The eyes search for their object, scanning the visual field for something to fix

upon. Touch requires a deliberate act of reaching out, a movement that seeks physical contact with the world. Taste, too, is most often a matter of choice – what is brought to the tongue is subject to selection and intention. Smell, though less obviously tied to choice, does not address the subject with the intention of communicative clarity; it lingers, surrounds, or invades without demanding acknowledgment. Hearing, however, operates differently. It stages the subject as a listener; draws it into a relationship with sound that is inherently interpellative. The listener does not simply seek out sound; sound arrives, and in doing so, it seems as if it expects of the subject a posture of listening.

This interpellation by sound is what makes listening uniquely strange. One does not simply hear; one is addressed by sound, called into the act of listening in a way that seems to implicate the listener as someone always already in the scene. Called into listening is not called into the scene, but found in it, as it were. Sure enough, this goes by and large for the gaze as well, but for both Lacan and Sartre, the prime theorists of the gaze, this has to do with the discovery of oneself as seeing.^v However, I think there's a difference: The scopic has to do with uncovering, the auditive has to do with staging. The gaze connects to shame in its discovery, whereas the listening connects to a finding that does not know what it has found: This staging of the subject as a listener creates a peculiar intimacy with sound – an intimacy that is not about proximity but about implication. The listener feels themselves entangled in the reason for the sound's being, as if their very act of listening gives the sound its purpose or justification. This is not to say that the sound depends on the listener for its existence but that the listener, by hearing, becomes a participant in the event of the sound.^{vi} In the gaze, you discover that another subject was (always) already there. In the listening position, you discover a subject in its emergence.

v Lacan in the aforementioned Seminar XI, but also in his *Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir dans l'inconscient freudien*. For Sartre, the gaze is primarily thematised in Part Three, Chapter One, section IV: «The Look.» of *L'Être et le Néant*.

vi This idea, along with several others surrounding it, I would not have gotten if not for Dolan's much inspiring essay *The Burrow of Sound*.

So my argument is that listening reveals something fundamental about subjectivity: the subject emerges not simply in speaking but in being addressed, in being called into a posture of listening. To listen is not merely to receive sound; it is to encounter oneself *implicated* as a listener, to sense the ways in which one's own subjectivity is constituted by this strange, interpellative event.

The one who hears does not merely hear what is said; they are drawn into a relationship with the act of enunciation, a relationship in which the boundaries between activity and passivity blur, and the subject finds itself both exposed and constituted. However, listening, I think, has the possibility of such a discovery without the implication of shame, which is more or less an impossibility in the scopic realm. Even among other people, there is something private about listening that does not go for the gaze. One can hear in private, but without what is heard being limited to a private discovery.

Is any, even small, breakthrough in thinking not a way in which the public (in the Kantian sense) has entered the private of thinking, which is to say, hearing oneself think. Conversely, any entry of the public into the domain of seeing, that is, seeing oneself see, I think connects with a kind of shame that immediately limits the discovery. This might be the fundamental privilege of sound in thinking. This might be the fundamental privilege of sound in psychoanalysis, which attempts to impede the gaze in favour of the voice, not just as the medium for meaning, but as an object beyond what it is trying to signify. Perhaps sound allows for a less shameful reflection than the gaze. However, when it comes to thinking, this object, sound, works as a signifier with a medium which is only there as an afterthought, in the sense that sound is of course not present in thought in the physical sense. Thus, the intrusion of sound as an outside object posits the subject as that which is "not this"; not the origin of this sound, but something else, something at the receiving end. This obviously gets muddy in thinking insofar as thinking includes at the very least the presupposition of some thought material, which is not the thought itself. In most cases, I think this material is sound, even if it is simply inferred. Thus, thought as dependent on the signifier becomes dependent on sound, even where it is not present. In this sense, what we "hear" when we are thinking is precisely the way in which the Other is present as a precursor in subjectivity, not simply as an obstacle, which

is also to say that thinking is always already caught up in the signifier, and in thinking, this signifier is caught up in sound.

THE SUBJECT IS WHAT IS HEARD BY THE SIGNIFIER

It is in this dynamic of active passivity that the analytic posture of listening finds its orientation. To listen analytically is to inhabit this space of tension – to allow oneself to be addressed by sound while resisting the impulse to bring it into understanding as either pure aesthetic experience or pure meaning-making. It is to remain open to the otherness which called one into listening in the first place, to take this Other not as a well- or ill-intentioned *someone*, but rather to listen to the very drive of otherness, which is of no intention, of no subject, but simply of that foreign, all too well-known contortion of our passive being. Extimacy in this manner does not describe a truth that has a special, deep connection to something in the subject, I think, but rather an address that might be found in anything.

To theorise listening in this way brings us into Heideggerian territory through the hyphenated notion of being-listening, but surely also into Lacanian territory through the idea that listening reveals the subject as decentered by its own constitutive otherness, which would be too far for Heidegger, I think. Hearing is fundamentally oriented towards the outside. It is a radar pointed at the exterior, and whatever it finds, whatever appears in hearing, it will always already be recognised as something not purely from the inside (even if the sound is truly from the inside.) In this way, even a thought arrives as something that has already orbited around the foreign object that a sound is to the listener, quite simply in its medium. The very form of perception that listening amounts to favours the subjective discovery, because it has the foreignness included in its signification. The listener exists not in isolation but in response, we might even say *as* response, called into being by a sound that is always other. Perhaps this gives a Lacanian short circuit that could explain the favourisation of sound in psychoanalysis, in the analytical discourse, since the subject is to be found as represented by a signifier to another signifier,^{vii} where we might then speculatively theorise that listening includes the medium

vii As the cryptic Lacanian formulation goes. One of its appearances is in *Écrits* (2006), p. 694. Remarkably, what Lacan writes here is that it is his definition of *the signifier* (adding matter-of-factly that there is no other), which however might lead us to conclude that the subject itself is only inferred, not defined.

of hearing, which can be included as a signifier, so that any signifier of sound gains the chance of quite simply representing the subject to the signifier that comes along with hearing itself. In hearing, there are necessarily two signifiers, which is the chance to hear the subject represented. Not clearly, not wholly, but inferred. You speak, and then the signifier represents the subject to this speech itself; the possibility is there to hear yourself as being spoken. When this happens, we have an analytical discourse.

THE RESPONSE OF SUBJECTIVITY IS NOT
INTERPELLATION

So what if we were to consider listening, and not speaking, as the fundamental subjective attitude – one that is implied even before Heidegger begins to think? Heidegger starts from the notion of the *Ruf*, the call, emphasising that in thinking, something is calling us into it: “Heist” and “Heisse,” this act of being named and summoned. Thinking, for Heidegger, is not a sovereign act but something we are compelled to do, an attunement to that which calls us. To “that, which wants to be thought”.^{viii} Listening plays a role in this for Heidegger. An attunement to the voice of being and all that, but perhaps he is also just describing the basic function of listening, describing how radical it is in its passive operation, how crucial it is for philosophy and psychoanalysis alike, and how immensely difficult it is to actually listen, and not simply look for one’s own speech in the other’s discourse. How difficult it is to not just understand, but listen, and, remarkably, not to listen in order to understand. Listening in this respect, paradoxically requires an overhearing. To not take the meaning that imposes itself on speech in our discourse to be truth, but rather to find out what to silence to hear that which wants to be thought. In this sense, listening is nothing more than this: being called into a posture of hearing, where subjectivity is constituted in response to this call. But importantly, the difference between “simple” interpellation,^{ix} where one would be called into existence by the address of social/cultural authority, and in this way being made subject to or simply subjected to this Other, the subjectivity I am theorising here would rather be one of hearing what is missed in precisely such a subjection. The constitution of subjectivity does not then simply have to do with the mis-hearing

viii All of these formulations are found in *Was heißt Denken?*

ix By which I mean the classic, Althusserian one. (Althusser 1970).

of recognition, that is; interpellation, but more fundamentally with the hearing of mis-recognition. The “response of subjectivity” I am advocating is thus not so much a response to the address of an other as much as it is the response to the address embedded in hearing itself. But this, as little as it might sound like, might also be one of the rarest modes of being.

Listening, then, in its active passivity, is not a reflection on the content of what is heard. It is not a thinking-about but a thinking-through hearing itself. So there is not fully an event of thinking before the listening.

This is one of the reasons why psychoanalysis is tricky, I think. The subject is not that which is found in the meaning, but found as receptive to this meaning, and yet precisely not caught by it. Missed in what is heard, yet found in being-listening. In this sense, the subject is not necessarily found in the words, found in what is being said, not as an organised internal monologue, but as the sheer possibility that something could be said. Subjectivity is dependent on the signifier, but this also means being dependent on the signifier in its absence. Even in silence, we remain being-hearing. I don’t think this makes equal sense in relation to the other senses.

THE LISTENING’S RELEVANCE FOR THE DREAM-WORK

Psychoanalysis centers on this strange dynamic. It is not about reaching a point where you can finally say something – although that may happen – it is about arriving at a point where you hear something. You hear yourself being-listening, and in what is heard, you encounter a subjective destitution: the dislocation of the imaginary certainties that cover over subjectivity itself. Thinking might well be the point of analysis but even thinking requires us to be placed in a posture of listening to what is being thought. In this sense, listening is surely rare. One might even say that perhaps the whole of psychoanalysis is simply about one moment of listening, which will make possible the venture of thinking, which was, of course, already present, but not heard. Is this not Freud’s point when he claims that the unconscious is a thinking that only gives us the result of its operation? A thinking that doesn’t know itself. I think Heidegger’s idea of thinking touches upon something similar: Our trouble with thinking is not that it is immensely difficult or that it is far away, the problem is conversely that it is always right here. A breakthrough may literally occur at any

moment, not at the end of a pre-planned path, but whenever listening is called for.

So perhaps we could venture to say that the strangest thing about our current situation is that we are still not listening.^x

Is this, then, where the dream enters? Dreams, in their peculiar mode of expression, seem to occupy a space where something insists on being heard but cannot speak directly. An address where even whispering deafens. The dream, however, takes a different approach – it works from the listener’s own wish (seemingly), bypassing the need for direct confrontation and instead casting the dreamer as the strangely addressed audience for their own machinations.^{xi} In this sense we could imagine the dreamer not as a thinker but as a listener. One that must go to the oddest of places just to hear oneself.

Dreams offer a unique opportunity to be once-removed from one’s own discourse, both in time and in consciousness. This removal creates the distance necessary to take up the posture of being-listening. Not just to the dream itself, but subsequently also to the dream-work. The dream is not something one wilfully constructs; it arrives as something readymade, something that speaks in its own language of condensations, displacements, and symbolic substitutions, according to Freud. To listen to the dream then, is not so much to listen to it in terms of its content, but to attune oneself to how the dream stages the subject as a listener. How it manages to tell its story, knowing backwardly all the things that its audience still cannot hear.

Dream analysis might initially seem like the active component of the process; the effort of interpreting the dream, of piecing together its latent content from its manifest form. However, if we follow the above developments of what it means to be listening, we must consider that the dream-work is in some sense dependent such an imagined, listening audience, and that, subsequently, the dreamer must be unconsciously aware of this in the dream construction. So if subjectivity indeed has to do with being-listening, then dreaming, in its presupposition of addressing someone, amounts to a kind of self-consciousness, which is of course entirely opposed to how it feels.

The dream does not simply speak then, it calls. It calls something called listening. So to crudely answer the question of the title:

x Obviously paraphrasing Heidegger’s perpetual gravitation point in *Was heißt Denken?*

xi This seems to be Freud’s initial approach in *Die Traumdeutung*.

What is called listening? Well, listening is called listening, which does not fully amount to a pleonasm, but instead implies how subjectivity is called listening, and precisely called, listening. This seemingly over-difficult formulation shows us the conjoining of the passive and the subjective, which might be counter-intuitive, but the turn from the understanding of a speaking subject to a listening one might be closer to the subject that psychoanalysis actually implies.

So the odd thing we see here is of course how the dream-mechanisms are not merely techniques of concealment but precisely also modes of address; ways in which the dream calls the audience into the subjective position: that of listening. It is the concealment itself that becomes a way of revealing, the implication of a subject through the work of signification, which is nonetheless the only way it can be revealed; as subjected to the signifier.

The analytic practice requires a listening for what wants to be heard in the dream, a listening that does not rush to assign meaning or reduce the dream to a coherent narrative. Instead, it remains open to the dream's peculiar logic, to the way it stages the subject as both the producer and the audience of its own discourse. This is why the dream is not just an expression of unconscious thought, but a staging of the subject's relation to thought itself. A staging that in a Lacanian view might actually amount to the unconscious all together. Namely not the supposed "deep truths" revealed by the dream, but how this work itself operates, which is to say, how the subject relates to this discourse of the Other. Or to put it bluntly; how is it that I speak, when I speak to myself as Other. How is it that I address myself, when I address myself not as myself.

To listen to a dream through the dream-work is to *encounter* oneself as a listener, to sense the ways in which one's own subjectivity is implicated in the dream-work, how activity and passivity switches in the dream, in the unconscious, in listening. The dream, in this way, becomes a practice of listening, and the work of analysis must mirror this listening in its own clinical space where interpretation, which is to say intervention, can find a way to listen to that which wants to be heard, and not just to that which was incidentally heard, perhaps we could say remembered, from the dream. Analysis is a practice of remembering, but maybe with the current theory in hand we could say that there is no remembering that is not also a listening. A staging of the subject's relation to its own thought.

The radical suggestion that we might draw from this, not least in relation to the title of the current volume, could be that contrary to popular belief, perhaps you cannot wake someone up with sound, by talking. But maybe the question of psychoanalysis as a practice is, can you wake someone up by listening?

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